Gantois Gisèle [a], Schoonjans Yves [b]
[a] Research Department of Architecture, Department of Architecture, KU Leuven, Ghent/Brussels, Belgium,
[b] Research Department of Architecture, Department of Architecture, KU Leuven, Ghent/Brussels, Belgium

Storytelling as strategy to envision the changing meaning of heritage from an object-focused approach towards an intertwined contextual one.[1]

Introduction

Locality and place making as elements of social sustainability are of great importance in a world of growing globalization. Although more and more researchers and professionals realize that the identity of small communities is also constructed by their heritage in the majority of current research there is still little attention paid to the vast amount of small modest heritage located in villages or in the rurbanisation[2] areas unless it is related to important historical sites.

Once we focus on the historical, social, cultural and ecological tissues, we transcend the solely focus on the object to explore the emotional and experiential realities of place and how these are rooted in the individual and collective memory as they unfold in the everyday life. In the creation of a sustainable and resilient society the meaning and the appropriation of that heritage is too important and too complex to restrict the significance of it purely to the artefact itself with its architectural, historical or archaeological values.

Current developments such as the changing vision on heritage from an exclusive 'substantial'[3] to a more anthropological perspective and the changing meaning of it from a top-down to a bottom-up 'right to heritage' imply a shift in heritage paradigms. A renewed reflection on heritage research and an interdisciplinary approach involving Art, Architecture, Engineering Sciences (Conservation of Monuments and Sites) and Social Sciences & Humanity (such as Antropology and Archaeology) are required.

This paper concentrates on these issues in the complex urban countryside of the region of Flanders (Belgium) a highly dense and post-industrialized area. Within the fabric we detect numerous small-scale historical buildings as chapels, rectories, ice-cellars, donjons, square farms and wind- and watermills and lots of relicts of an industrial past. As an architect specialized in restoration and reuse of built heritage of local importance, I developed a special interest for the fragile more hidden significances of these structures. With this contribution I want to share possible methods and tools I employed in my own practice and tested out with International Master students[4]. By exploring, detecting, unveiling and mapping the intangible dimension of the tangible we can develop a more inclusive understanding of heritage. Within my research I explore the more hidden relationship of heritage with its multi-layered context using the strategy of storytelling as a spatial practice.

The changing vision on heritage

The region of Flanders is under a growing urban pressure in current times of increasing migration and mobility of both humans (ex-city dwellers, immigrants, tourists) and non-humans (nature with different animal groups has (re-) claimed this sites creating habitats that are exceptional for biodiversity), with a tension between them and between them and policy makers.

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[1] Ongoing PhD research project: 'The Architect – Heritage Practitioner as Storyteller. Tracing the Ecological and Cultural Significance of rural built heritage of local importance in the framework of adaptive reuse.' By dra Gisèle Gantois, Architect & MSc in Conservation of Monuments and Sites, Promotors Professor Yves Schoonjans and Professor Krista De Jonge.

[2] Rurbanisation: urbanization of formerly rural areas on the fringes of towns or cities. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com

[3] Davallon, J., The Game of Heritagization. In X. Roigé & J. Frigolé (eds.), *Constructing Cultural and Natural Heritage Parks, Museums and Rural Heritage*. Girona: ICRPC. 2010. p.39-62.

[4] KU Leuven, Faculty of Architecture campus Sint-Lucas Ghent/Brussels www.internationalmasterofarchitecture.be

Next to the monuments of national or international interest we are surrounded by modest structures that we inherit and that have important familiar but sometimes hidden, cultural meaning for our landscape and its inhabitants. However we can detect in the current local discourse that the value of rural built heritage is more and more measured according to its financial profitability or its picturesque character. The fabric is then judged according to its charming 'authenticity', based on visual and often superficial qualifications. The accent lies on the materiality and the attractiveness of heritage composed of historical artefacts that finally become empty shells ones restored and reused. Its educational role is put in the foreground, narratives of memories being a common tool to do so. Although interesting and even important the danger is that the highly urbanized cultural landscape is exclusively promoted as a touristic destination and risks to be colonialized by leisure seeking tourists. Decision makers hereby often oversee the high community involvement and heritage appropriation.

Modest heritage played and still plays an important role in the identity, quality and social cohesion of a region but several of these fabrics have experienced decline leading to at first sight disused sites.

Inside the range of methods for managing and valuing monuments and sites, there is a well-known and good functioning framework to cope with the material aspects of conservation and restoration, but a framework for the intangible layers is clearly lacking. The interaction of locals and newcomers with local built heritage and its territory is often neglected, the special cultural and fragile ecological values not considered. Remarkable enough the 'perimeter' of the site, the intangible or cultural and ecological significance very often seems to lie at the very centre of the challenge of the restoration project posted. Yet in the meetings with clients or decision makers, this rarely comes up as a topic of discussion, its existence either taken for granted or neglected awkwardly. Forgetting about them is not difficult as they are often invisible or disappearing amid all the other elements, especially if one focuses only on the artefact as historic or economic data. This is enforced by the fact that there are no approved ways for tracing these special values.

Until recently the paradigms dealing with protected heritage where widely accepted, the particular problem-solutions already achieved without question. The tradition in which their characteristics were conceived is partly gone. The current frequent and deep discussions on legitimate methods, problems and standards of solutions mark a pre-paradigm shift and can be seen in a global renewed vision on sustainability. Existing paradigms are under attack and are subject to change in interesting debates and conferences all over the world. This not only implies a transformation in the approach from an object-focused towards an intertwined contextual one but within the academic world and the government policies one also detects a shift from conventional top-down to bottom-up community-based decision-making and to a more participatory way of working. The roles of architects are redefined responding to this shift.

The question of empathy becomes paramount.

Storytelling as a spatial practice.

Next to the historical and material layering there are these timeless immaterial attachments expressed in an endless conversation between the landscape and building and the individual or community.

One side of it involves places having meaning for the natives through the events in their lives, which have taken place in the specific landscape or building. Generations pass knowledge of these events down to each other by marks and traces. People remember what has happened as if they 'see' the events inscribed in their collective memory.

The other side of the interaction is the triggering of memories and feelings by the simple sight of a place: this is the landscape or fabric 'talking' to us. The way the individual sees the built form in the environment is affected by what he already knows, believes or remembers from other places. Here enters the value of the newcomer (the new dweller, tourist, immigrant, architect-heritage specialist, etc.) for heritage and landscapes in our intercultural society as he attributes new layers of significance to the existing.

This implies a move towards a heritage, which is organically integrated into the life of different communities and by this territorialized and anchored.

In the physical world, context will have a dimensional and a historical dimension, both of which go to make up the layering of a place with masses and territories with enclosures or boundaries

that determine the landscape. For inhabitants however the territory of local built heritage comprises not necessarily the surroundings of a bounded place (the legally protected artefact/area as heritage) even if physical walls or hedges surround it. It is as if no one owns the place but at the same time all have use of it. It is a place of collective independence where people can take initiatives that support their desire for the collective but also highlight an inherent sense of personal freedom, balancing the concept of togetherness with the concept of independence. This makes it a place of attachment and recognition appropriated in different ways.
The rural built heritage is then not purely an artefact but rather a zone in which the pathways and trails of natives and newcomers both human and non-human are thoroughly entangled as part of subtle social, cultural and ecological meshwork.[5] (Fig. 01.)

Fig. 01. Village of Brussegem, Province of Vlaams-Brabant, Belgium. Pathways and trials of natives and newcomers both human and non-human are thoroughly entangled as part of subtle social, cultural and ecological meshwork.

Source: Gisèle Gantois

It belongs to the well-known trusted things and attributes the human scale to the landscape and includes all living things.
The link between heritage and landscape then becomes increasingly important and by focusing on 'cultural heritage' we can explore the close relationship between it as well as the limits between the natural and the cultural[6]. The main viewpoint on heritage matters does not depend anymore on the different meanings of its individual buildings alone but rather on the entwined fabric of buildings and landscapes that in their grouping or agglomeration create a valuable human made cultural landscape in the past, present and future enforcing the identity, quality and social cohesion of a place and region.

Thorough preliminary investigations of the architectural, historical and archaeological values, now the primary determinants of significance in heritage matters by archival research and building archaeology[7] can become a support to better understand the attachment of individuals and communities to heritage places. We can add to the literal layers of archaeological remains the different cultural and ecological values as we realise just how great the implications of these values are and just how minimal the extent in the projects of restoration often is. (Fig. 02)

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[5] Ingold, T., *Up, across and along* in T. Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge, 2007. p. 72-103.
[6] Gravari-Barbas, M. *New challenges for cultural heritage: Synthesis of the final report,* France, Université Paris, Agence Nationale de la Recherche. 2014.
[7] building archaeology: Bauforschung

Fig. 02. Rectory of the village of Meuzegem, Province of Vlaams-Brabant, Belgium. Left: Restoration of the mural paintings. (2015) Middle: Mural paintings discovered behind the wallpaper.(2006) Right: Children playing in the former reception room of the house of the priest, thus appropriating the space 'in between', the time between the original occupation and the new one.(2001)

Source: left: courtesy of local inhabitant. Middle & right: Gisèle Gantois.

At the basis of all possible methods to explore, to detect, to unveil and to map this intangible dimension of the tangible lays the participant observation. As Tim Ingold puts it we should join with those among whom we work.[8]

The key thing is that the architect - heritage practitioner is an outsider in the local landscapes and buildings he has to study. One can never discover the world of meaning just by observing a place *from outside* and doing material survey only. (Collecting information) The architect as a stranger has to develop the ability not only to discover the history of the artefact and of the material it is made of but to take time to listen to and to observe both the local and the newcomer *from inside* (Collecting meaning) because he finally intervenes in a process that is already going on. It is crucial not only to map in a precise way the artefact itself but also the complex mesh of meanings to relate it towards a bigger framework of cultural and spatial experiences, urban and landscape structures. To gain insight into people's and other living creatures' *why* and *how* and their and our relation to places we can express perceptions through mapping *from the ground*. This implies that to be able to understand the processes of heritagization, appropriation, motivation, aspiration, to perceive fears, hopes, emotions, memories and traces and to express our own understandings we not only use cartographical techniques but: 'We have to take time to step across the roads, to visit the places of which the inhabitants tell'[9]. The investigation then turns into a travel story, storytelling into a spatial practice.[10] The institutional database (information) is enlarged with data collected by walking (meaning).

Every new event or interference intervenes in a specific historical situation. Society is conceived as an organic and integrated whole. Cultural landscapes grow in an organic continuous or discontinuous way. They might be viewed under the aspects of economy, or family, or religion, or politics but all these interpenetrate one another and constitute a single reality. Subdivision fades into the background of human experience because it is omnipresent: the cultural landscape is a receptacle for people and events, endlessly moved, exchanged, replaced, forgotten.

The classical way of analysing by layering and slicing information appears too limiting here. We can refer to the Middle Ages where instead of maps, they used what the modern Historian François de Dainville called 'cartes parlantes'. These 'terriers' listed hundreds, or even thousands of individual plots of land in a set of fields, giving the exact location of each.[11] They were judged according not to the adherence to coordinates or scale, but rather according to the faithfulness with which they

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[8] Ingold, T., 2007, idem

[9] Lee, J. and Ingold, T. (2008) *Introduction* in *Ways of walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot,* (Anthropological studies of creativity and perception) England, Ashgate, 2008. p.1-19.

[10] Certeau, M. De, *The practice of everyday life,* Berkeley, CA : University of California Press. 1984.

[11] Oles, B. T., *Recovering the wall*: enclosure, ethics and the American landscape, PhD, Citable URI: http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/45437. 2008.

described relationships between people – usually landowners – and their physical environment. [12] This way of mapping reveals complexity, instead of a way of simplifying. (Fig.03)

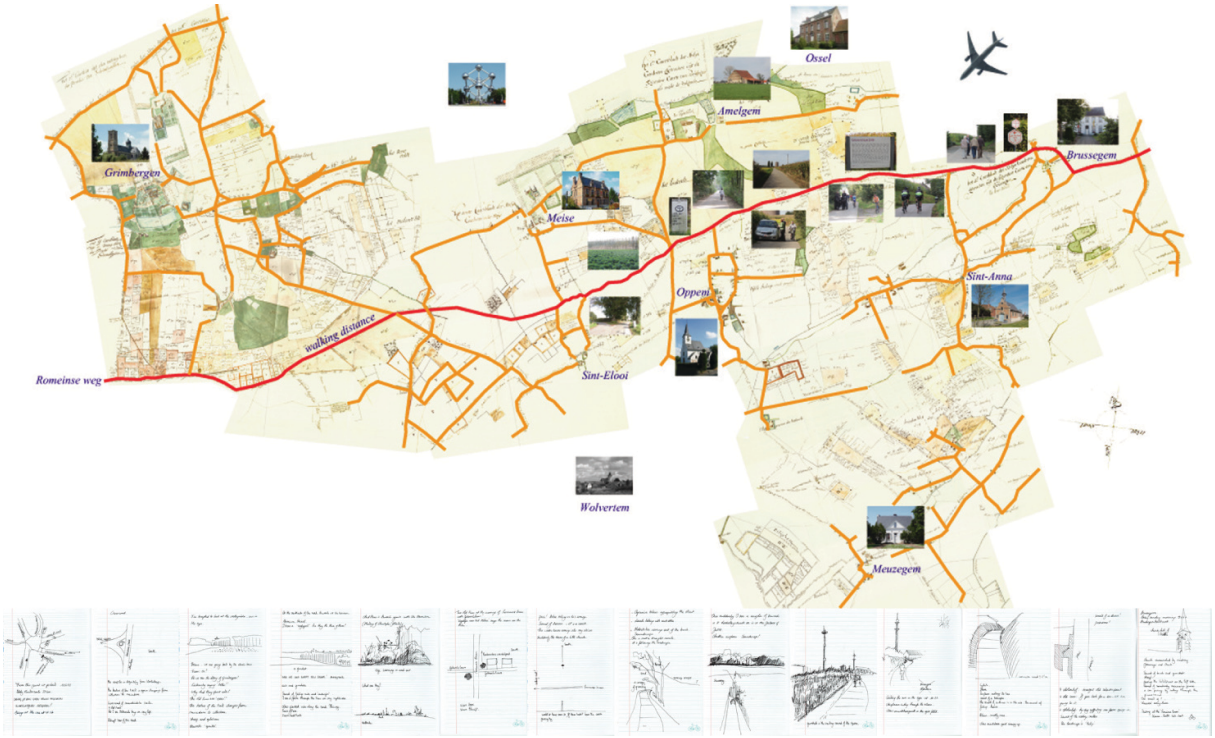
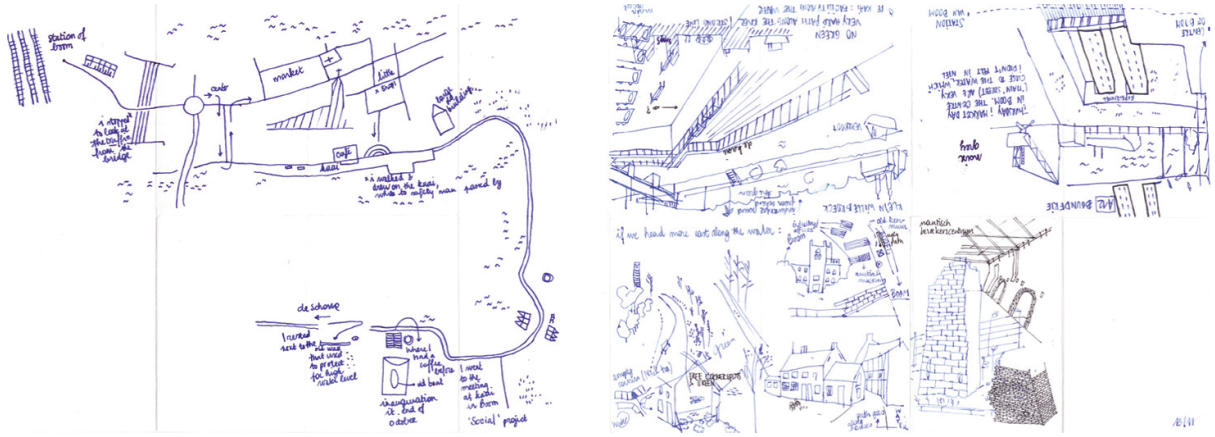


Fig. 03. Carte Parlante. Line of walk 1 – Brussegem-Grimbergen - 28 September 2014. Assembling of extracts of the "Caertenboek van Grimbergen 1699", maps registering the properties of the abbey of Grimbergen in former times. Indication of the old road in the fragile meshwork of paths and trails, villages protected heritage and new reference points and experiences.

Source: Gisèle Gantois

This can be expressed in drawings and sketches, by making plans and models. The drawings and models are used to generate knowledge, to test existing theory and as mediating tool with different stakeholders.

The act of watching closely can lead to real closeness. Retracing the existing makes things clearer and feeds the understanding of the meaning of the existing today in its context. The act of drawing is a way of observing and therefore a way of reflecting. Drawing makes one see things differently. The drawing so becomes a tool for the eye. (Fig. 04)



[12] Sack, R. D., *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986. p.62.

Fig. 04. Personal mapping of experiences and observations in little jot booklets, drawing becomes a tool for the eye and makes things clearer. (Sketch booklets are fold out of an A4 piece of paper to an A7. They have the advantage to be discreet and small, one can always have them with them on a walk, to take note of unexpected encounters.)

Source: courtesy of Floor, student at the International Masters, KU Leuven, Faculty of Architecture campus Sint-Lucas Ghent/Brussels

Model making can help us in visualising the intangible, by using different materials and scale.

Once we develop the ability to transcend the focus on heritage as an artefact (a finished *project or thing*) we can discover the evidences of live, human or non-human. The monuments are than considered as *processes of growth*. By bringing them back from their *passive* to their *active* materiality 'we (can) rescue them from the cul-de-sac into which they had been cast and restore them to the currents of life.'[13] Heritage is than changing into a phenomenon cutting across all fields of cultural and ecological activity. It becomes a meta-cultural *process* in the sense that artefacts are not by themselves heritage unless there is value attached to them.[14]

Intrinsic qualities can be discovered by studying which 'plants are growing on it, what animals living in it, how all living creatures human and non-human move in, over, through or around it, what it sounds and feels like at different times of day, after dark or in various weathers.'[15]

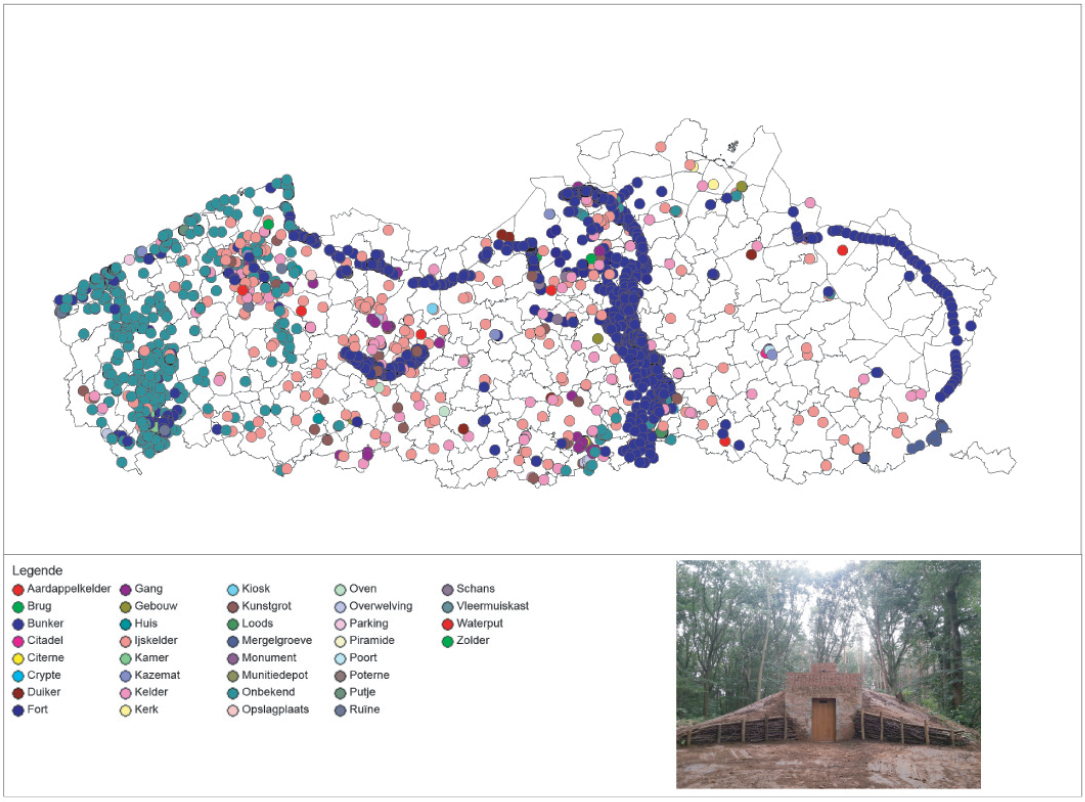


Fig. 05. Map of the region of Flanders, Belgium with an indication of the hibernation places of bats. These places are former ice cellars, forts, bunkers etc. The bats add new significance to this small hidden heritage and a different mapping of heritage based on intrinsic qualities with its actual ecological value is generated. Right under: Former ice cellar of Schiplaken, Zemst, Province of Vlaams-Brabant, Belgium, converted into a hibernation place for bats.

Source: map: @Vleermuizenwerkgroep Natuurpunt, ice cellar: Gisèle Gantois

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[13] Ingold, T., *Making; Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Routledge, London and New York. 2013. p.12

[14] Sánchez-Carretero, C., Significance and social value of Cultural Heritage: Analyzing the fractures of Heritage in *Science and Technology for the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* – Rogerio-Candelera, Lazzari & Cano (eds), Taylor & Francis Group, London. 2013.

[15] Ingold, T., *Making; Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Routledge, London and New York. 2013. p.12

I discovered an interesting parallel in my working methodology of an architect-heritage practitioner and the strategy of the storyteller. In "Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows" Benjamin[16] states that 'the figure of the storyteller gets its full corporeality only for the one who can picture both the man who has stayed at home who knows the local tales and tradition and the one who comes from a far. One could picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil and the other in the trading seaman.'
As Christopher Alexander explains in the Oregon Experiment: 'When an individual creates his own place, he takes these extra, subtle needs into account as a matter of course, because he can feel them. But when he has to explain these needs to an architect, the only ones which get across are the ones which he can state in words.'[17] This implies that the method of *interview* appears not always adequate in finding out the significances for the native or the meaning given by the newcomer. The architect - heritage practitioner has to be immersed registering the off-the-record. This can be expressed in chronicles based on historical research in situ and archives, observation and conversation rather than using the interview or questionnaire. Chronicles create the opportunity to revise at each moment the restoration project in relation to new experiences and encounters.

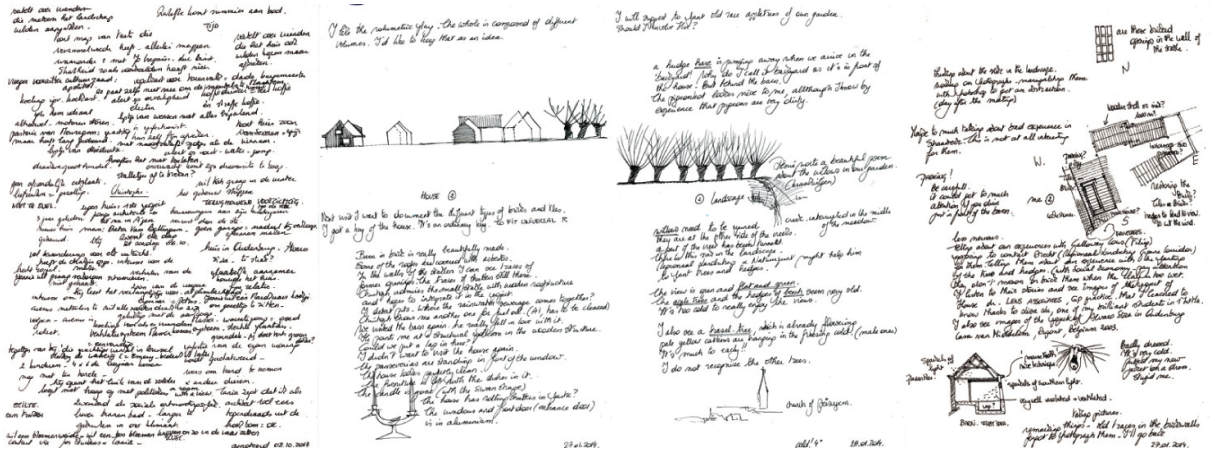

Fig. 06. 4 pages out of the Chronicle of the project of Peizegem.
Source: Gisèle Gantois

Conclusion

With this shift of heritage from object to relationship, it becomes a canvas or a medium, which creates social projects. Understanding the attachment of individuals and communities to their territory together with the land-shaping factors of our cultivated landscapes and structures can help us in developing better and more nuanced restoration/reuse projects as rural built heritage truly enables resilient environments. The ecological aspects of these buildings and their material assures the minimal environmental hereditary effect on the next generation; the cultural significance in the local context on the other hand gives them a true and authentic character and connects the buildings with the social fabric over different generations. Local built heritage can very well adapt itself to a changing society; even give a dynamic force to shifting citizenry as it integrates alterity and is community driven.
Just like the storyteller, the architect can be the mediator between the local nameless inhabitant and the newcomer 'retelling' both their stories by adding his own experience when dealing with an existing structure with its own values in a given environment.

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[16] Benjamin, W., *The Storyteller, Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*. http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf

[17] Alexander C., *The Oregon Experiment*, Oxford University Press. 1975

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